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ABSTRACT

If sexism, inherent in the fabric of the culture of human society, produced sexist language, then sexist language no doubt helps reinforce and teach sexism to the users of that language. Language feeds back the sexism, sexism feeds back through language. Treating symptoms of disease alone will not eliminate the disease, but may help, while treating the disease caused by sexism alone may lead to reinfection from the language. "Kids' Meal" boxes, available from "Wendy's" and featuring "Potato Head Kids" engaging in activities on the outside of the box, reinforce sexist values in the culture. Women are portrayed as incompetent, passive, caregivers, lacking rank and authority. Men are authoritative, adventurous, and rescuers. The boxes became a matter of discussion in a college composition class. As an exercise, the activity of discovering the values inherent in the box helped students to recognize that equalizing representation--say by alternating "he" and "she"--is not enough. The content of the representation matters every bit as much, if not more than, the numbers, and this holds for issues of race, gender, sexual preference, and all of the other "-isms" based on prejudice. (KEH)

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WENDY'S, THE POTATO HEAD KIDS, AND ME: DEALING WITH SEXIST REPRESENTATIONS IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

OR, UN-WRAPPING THE HAMBURGER[1]

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I

> The sexism of languages (as usual I shall be dealing primarily with English, but languages vary in the type and degree of sexism they display) is a subject invented and researched by feminists. The ideological framework they have used is simple and explicit: briefly, they start with the hypothesis that the lexicon, grammatical structure, etc. of a given language will contain features that exclude, insult or trivialise women, and they set out to identify the features in question.
>
> (Cameron, p.72)

It may be argued that as a male, middle class, white-guy, I should butt out. But I don't like the way things are in our culture either. It does affect me. Honest. My wife, Joanne Raymond, has her doctorate in pharmacy and is the assistant director of pharmacy at a large county hospital; she makes considerably more money than I do or probably ever will. OK. Unusual circumstance, one in who-knows-how-many. But there are words floating out there for me, pejorative, nasty words that I've heard, or inferred, or remember fearing —

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wimp, sissy, pussy-whipped (notice the minus maleness of the words, the derogation by equating with female or subordination to female sexuality).

After Joanne received her doctorate, she took a job in Connecticut and I went along to write and be a house-husband. Nearly everyone who met me asked what job brought *me* to Connecticut, what job was *I* looking for (when they discovered I had followed Joanne and not *vice verse*), but was I really going to *make* Joanne do "all the work"? OK, if I'd played the game the way the culture (and language?) dictate I should, I would be "the bread winner" and not have the same struggles Joanne has, I'd be supported in my desires to dominate, compete, and win. But I just want to justify writing this at all. I have had at least something of a taste of being "other" than the white-male norm projected in our culture.

> It is not good enough to shrug our shoulders and say that male bias in usage is purely grammatical, and that therefore it does not matter.
>
> (Cameron, p.73)

Of course, there's my five year old daughter, Julia, and my two month old daughter Rebecca. I may be writing for them as much as for anyone. They remind me that the house is on fire and I sit at the keyboard, playing with words. I focus on Julia[3], because the narrative behind it begins when she was three. Joanne took her to a friend's house, a friend who practices medicine with a license and who had just had a baby. Julia wanted to know about this new mother, and when Joanne told her that she was a doctor, Julia corrected her.

"No, Mamma," Joanne related Julia's response to me later, "Only mens [sic] are doctors. Women are nurses."

While I'm not sure that Julia understood fully that doctors occupy a higher-up position on the hierarchy, it's clear that where there's smoke…well, she had already begun to learn

the classification system, hadn't she? Now it is even clearer. She loves Barbie's, dresses in fancy dresses "like a bride," and understands gender roles in fairly traditional ways, although now she does a better job of understanding that either men or women can have most jobs.

Is gender construction implicit in the language? If we correct our children, (as Joanne, who considered briefly the notion of having Julia call her doctor-mamma, certainly did back when Julia was three), are we treating the symptom or the disease? An uneasy question, if ever there was one.

> The question of whether linguistic sexism is a cause or an effect of women's oppression, and the problem of defining its boundaries, ultimately links up with the debate on language and reality, who controls language and who is alienated from it.
>
> (Cameron, p.75)

> ...One implication of this argument is that the ability of language to reinforce the status quo helps to perpetuate sexist attitudes and practices and inhibit social change. Another implication is that... women are likely to "see themselves as the language sees them." ...It seems fairly clear that the net result of either or both possibilities is to help "keep women in their place."
>
> (Adams and Ware, p.67)

The answer to the question of treating symptom or disease is both. Separating cause and effect, in this case in particular, may be another example of artificial opposites, empirical-artifact dichotomies. So many biological systems appear to have feedback mechanisms, why not the cultural organism of human society? If sexism, inherent in the fabric of the culture, produces sexist language, then sexist language no doubt helps re-in-force and teach sexism to the users of that language. Language feeds-back the sexism,

sexism feeds-back through language. It's an unhealthy diet, at best. I don't want to get into oological questions of primacy, just to observe that from where I'm standing, it looks as though treating symptoms alone will not eliminate the disease, but may help, while treating the dis-ease caused by sexism alone may lead to re-infection from the language. Symptom treatment must be deepened, the roots of the tumor must be removed, more than cosmetic cleaning up of pronouns and word endings is needed. I'm sure our doctor would agree, at least for cancer, there is a need to treat the tumor (symptom *and* source of the disease) and the whole disease — cancer throughout the body, all of the tumors, all of the cancerous cells — as well as a need to eliminate carcinogenic environmental and life-style factors.

The changes, in short, ought to occur at the process level of language, the content, the context, the semantic levels, the usage, the lexical, the grammar, all. And in the beliefs, values, practices of society, too. Also, in the images. But how many times, in my own as well as others' teaching, has the issue of sexist language been reduced to "...the use of male pronouns as generic or unspecified terms..."? (Cameron. p.84) And how differently can it be approached in, say an upper-division Composition course I teach, Comp 3015, "Writing for the Sciences"? Especially considering Cameron's point that "...More women will not take up science just because scientists are referred to as *she*. " (88)

II

> The outcry which so often attends the demand for linguistic reform comes from those who do not want to be shaken out of the old way of looking at things. If these people are numerous and powerful, strong conservative forces come into play and reform does not succeed.
>
> (Cameron 87)

Oddly enough, this brings me to hamburgers. No, being more specific, this brings me to the wrappings in which some hamburgers (actually, it probably was a cheeseburger) are sold to little girls. That is, to my little girl, Julia. Am I being the patriarchal protector of her honor? Well, I hope I can help, parentally, to protect her options, her self-esteem, her awareness of the world. These ought not to be regulated by hamburger wrappings. But wrappings have a way of intruding, and the year my daughter asserted the primacy of men in the medical profession, they intruded right into Comp 3015, where they have remained. They have also spread to other composition courses, and into tutorial sessions in the writing lab at the University of Minnesota, where I spend some of my teaching time.

I took Julia to Wendy's® for a burger one night a couple of years ago, and bought her the "Kids' Meal™". You know the kind, perhaps? It comes in a cardboard box. Inside: a hamburger (or cheeseburger, or even bits of chicken), french fries, and a toy prize. The outside of the box: brightly colored images of the toys, Potato Head Kids™, going about Potato Head Kids™ activities. And, although a cosmetic approach alone might have corrected the usage (policeman to police officer, for instance), this box-wrapping had a lot to say about the potato head culture that goes far beyond language fixing — and by extension, a lot to say about us as producers and consumers of that culture (and its

wrapping). My daughter asked me to read the box to her and help her with the activities. These are the words that I found:

> Policeman Duke™ is directing traffic. Circle the vehicles going in the same direction as the arrow in the stoplight.
>
> Help Cap'n Kid™ discover four things near his ship that rhyme with "sail."
>
> Slugger's™ favorite bat is different from the rest. Which one is it?
>
> While Krispy™ played on the beach, she lost her radio, beach ball, umbrella and lotion. Can you find them?
>
> (Wendy's® Kids' Meal™ Box)
> (™ Playskool, Inc.)

The day after I bought this hamburger container, my students saw a box. They noted that it had bright colors. They described the potato heads. One or two mentioned that each potato head was doing something. One noticed that the only clearly defined (by language) female potato head sun-bathed while the males were active. I asked them what we knew about potato head culture from the box. Active. Adventurous. Playful — they had fun. Yes, yes, yes. At least, the males. I asked them about gender roles in the society (a culturally defined question?). Policeman Duke™, male, is authoritative, competent, directs traffic, I pointed out. Yes, they agreed. And Cap'n Kid™ ventures forth, sword in hand (are all males aggressive, domineering, power-hungry?), discovering items that rhyme with "sail". The woman (notice) who observed that female potato heads (Krispy™) sunbathed opposed this to males playing baseball (Slugger™). Interestingly enough, Slugger's™ text has no sex-linked pronouns. The male identification, I pointed out, was based on the assumption, born out perhaps by the other images, that males were the active members of the culture. Another woman pointed out that the infield of the baseball diamond was grass,

and that men played with grass infields but not women.[4] A man in class pointed out that a nurse was also playing baseball — (although I raised the question of the gender of the nurse then, as will be seen, potato head nurse's on hamburger wrapper-boxes are female).[5]

Finally, I explored another aspect, a key aspect to my own critique of the Wendy's® food covering. You see, the pictures are puzzles and games. Cap'n Kid™, with the child's assistance, discovers. Policeman Duke™ directs, the child identifies which cars defy his direction (indicated by an arrow on a green light — many students understood this to be a sign of conformity as a potato head value). Slugger™ has a favorite bat, different from the others, which the child locates. Krispy™ has lost her things at the beach. She needs the child's help to find them — note, she does not discover items on the beach like Cap'n Kid™, she is not active like Slugger™, she has no authority like Policeman Duke™. She has no rank (Captain, for instance) or role in the society. She is incompetent, passive, and presumably not having fun (anymore). Am I overstating the case? Is she Krispy™ from staying out in the sun too long? Doesn't she have *any* sense?

Well, so much for the box my daughter received. This was not (I confess) her first potato head kid™, although this is the first time I *looked* at what I was subjecting her to, what I was nurturing her with.[6] This time, she "won" (or lost) Policeman Duke™. Have I helped anything by renaming the sexless plastic object "police officer"? Especially when the text of the box is non-verbal as much as verbal? Krispy™ clearly dresses from cultural stereotypes, complete with a flowered hat and long eye-lashes; the gender, authority and action of the others comes across through posture, mustache, and "masculine" brown shoes. In short, image accompanies text as "...strong conservative forces come into play..." (Cameron p.87) and assert sexism disguised as food wrapping (nurturance).

> Connect the dots and see how Fireman Sparky™ can safely bring a little kitty down from a tall tree.
>
> Which way should she go? Help nurse Sophie™ find the way to her patient on the top floor of the hospital.
>
> (Wendy's® Kids' Meal™ Box)
> (™Playskool, Inc.)

Have I gone too far in interpreting one box? The box occupied my thoughts throughout the evening I bought it. The next day, before the class I was responsible for teaching, I went to another Wendy's® and asked if I might buy some of the Kids' Meals™ boxes. After being shuffled to the manager, *he* generously gave me five boxes (one for each of the small groups I divide my class into). He didn't ask why I wanted to use them for a class, or what I intended to do with them, and I admit that I didn't offer to explain (except to say that I wanted to explore the potato head® culture using the boxes). These boxes were not the same as the other box. (I then made my way to the original Wendy's® and obtained, from the male manager, ten boxes which have already been described.)

On one side of the new box, however, Fireman Sparky™ was going to save a kitty; the child discovers how this competent and authoritative man will do so by connecting dots to reveal the ladder leaning into the tree. On the other side, nurse Sophie™ has lost (?!) her patient, and needs the child's help to find the patient. Not only is she in a stereotypical (traditional?) role of a care-giver, she is incompetent (scatter-brained?) at her work and, while Policeman Duke™, Cap'n Kid™, and Fireman Sparky™ all get to capitalize their titles, nurse is relegated to lower-case lower-class. Some of my students, in the many times I have reused these boxes, have pointed out that the typography varies with gender — the males have larger type and/or more prominently placed type, and the females have less well placed type and, in the case of poor nurse Sophie, significantly smaller type.

Why isn't the child doing the puzzles asked to help the (lost) fire fighter find his way to the fire? Or to connect the dots to reveal what the nurse uses to help her patients (perhaps a bed pan, for realism and a dose of why men don't do that work as much as women)? "Only men's is doctors, women are nurses," young Julia's voice echoes from the beginning of this paper.

III

> I have no illusions that positive language will change the world. More women will not take up science just because scientists are referred to as *she*. But what might be achieved is a raising of people's consciousness when they are confronted with their own and others' prejudices against saying *she*.
>
> (Cameron p.88)

While the argument can easily be made, on the basis of counting male and female characters, that women are "represented" on the boxes[7], I don't think that it is too much to say that the makers of these boxes have created sexist texts that are symptomatic of their at least unexamined sexism, if not volitional "conservative forces."[8]

These boxes re-in-force sexist values in the culture. Unfolding the boxes constructs definitions for both feminine and masculine genders. The message of potato head kids™ is the message of our own culture, which produces them. Women are portrayed as incompetent, passive, care-givers, lacking rank and authority. Men are authoritative (domineering?), adventurous (hostile?), and rescuers (interfering?). The hamburgers and fries inside the package *may* pass for nurturance, but the wrapper is reactionary garbage, poison that must be answered with sedition against the (male) authoritarianism that

produced it. That Playskool™, Inc., produces the Potato Head™ line raises serious questions about the products our children play with every day.

As an exercise, the activity of discovering the values inherent in the coverings helps students to recognize that equalizing representation — say by alternating he and she — is not enough. The content of the representation matters every bit as much, if not more, than the numbers, and this holds for issues of race, gender, sexual preference, and all of the other "-isms" based in prejudice. It may even hold for issues of quotas in desegregation — numbers count, but content matters.

IV

Where do folk-linguistic stereotypes come from? Do they come from boxes that wrap hamburgers? Yes, in part. And yes, in part, stereotypes create the boxes. Both must be stopped. One feeds the other, both are garbage. Throwing the boxes away is not enough. They are recycled in the minds of children who read them. Calling the wrappers into question and holding Wendy's® accountable could be a beginning — a beginning that includes treating the symptom (the box) and the dis-ease (the underlying sexism that those individuals who create, approve, produce and pass out the boxes and potato head kids™ — and all of the other toys and books and boxes of propaganda — perpetrate and perpetuate).[9] I hope that bringing the boxes to my students' attention might also be a step, with luck and perseverance, towards more women taking up science. And challenging it and its assumptions, especially, but not limited to, those assumptions about women, minority, and age.

In my classes I state, finally, that this box was what *I* meant by sexist and racist language — that changing a few pronouns in papers was not enough. What I try to get across is that students — and all of us — need to be aware of, and not pass on, language and images that "…exclude, insult or tivialise…" (Cameron, p.72) any group (gender / sex / race / sexual preference / religious / etc.) or member of that group (on the basis of that membership).[10] I didn't have Cameron's exact words that first day I used the exercise, but I do now. What we all need to do, myself amply included, is be aware of and not pass on (especially, but not exclusively, to children) language and images that "…exclude, insult or trivialise…" any group, or any member of any group because of their membership in that group. That includes men who don't make as much money as their wives (and don't, by virtue of that fact, have biological/anatomical defects), women who are doctors or anything else they freely (and what does this mean, if freedom is expressed by the images on hamburger boxes?) choose to be, and, yes, potato head kids™. Especially nurse Sophie™ and Krispy™. They have the right to be seen as active, competent, fully capable members of the culture. And the right to see themselves reflected as such in the signs of the culture. Especially food wrappers.

If this text were a fiction, and not bound to what actually happened (or my interpretation of what actually happened), and if I could build an allegory, I would have added a sister. I would have taken the place of my students, and let my sister lead me to understand the meaning of the text that wrapped my daughter's food. And I would join arms with my sister, because what hurts her hurts me, and because what limits her possibilities limits mine, and because those who oppress are damaged by the oppression, and I don't want to be damaged. But I have no biological sister, and so I call to my brothers, biological and otherwise. Let's stop the bull-shit, and speak out. End our silence, now. Maybe then we can find our sisters, whole people.

But we cannot wholly find our sisters until we, too become whole. And it is important to note, to point out, to recall, that the males on those boxes had to be authority figures (controlling), aggressive (hostile), rescuers (interfering) and that they do not fail or lose things. Along with the messages which oppress women, men become oppressed and limited in their range of existence, as well. Men, as constructed in our culture, cannot allow themselves to be vulnerable, make mistakes, or follow. They cannot be whole.[11] The men are just as wrapped up by the hamburger covering as the women, but they won't even notice, because along with that control, aggression, hostility, and (pre-tense of) invulnerability, come privilege, power and economic advantage. At what cost? Certainly more than the cost of a hamburger. Even if it was a cheeseburger.

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[1] The class room exercise described in this paper, along with discussion of the themes within this paper, were part of a presentation at the Midwest Writing Centers Association (MWCA) Fall Conference, October 6, 1990, under the title: "Wendy's, the Potato Head Kids, and Me: Dealing with Sexist and Racist Representations in Language." This paper has been submitted to the proceedings for that conference, which will be published by the MWCA.

I wish to thank the many students who have participated in the exercise, and who have expanded my own perceptions of the Potato Head® Kids culture, as well as the participants of the MWCA conference. I would also like to thank Professor Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, whose spirited leadership in discussions of the issues set forth here and generous encouragement were instrumental to this paper.

Finally, this paper is dedicated to Julia Sarah Raymond Dickel and Rebecca Anne Raymond Dickel, in the hope that growing up surrounded by cultural criticism will help lead to cultural literacy without depriving them of childhood joys.

[2] Michael Dickel, BA, MA, is currently working on a doctorate in English at the University of Minnesota, where he teaches in the Program in Composition and Communication and edits "Words Worth," the weekly book review section of the student newspaper, *The Minnesota Daily*.

[3] And for this paper, which originated before Rebecca, will remain with Julia.

[4] Not being a tremendous baseball or softball fan, I must confess that I still don't know if this is true or not...

[5] At the MWCA conference, one participant pointed out to me that although a nurse is at bat in the picture, Slugger™ has his mit raised, the ball the nurse just hit clearly going directly to it. And this without even looking at the ball or the nurse. "Easy out"? Or just plain "easy"?

[6] Granted she was only three. I only "subjected" her when I read the words — which says something about the dominant and oppressive nature of print — but the pictures were still "readable," to a significant extent.

[7] There are two women and four men, so even this argument is somewhat questionable.

[8] What else can be said about a national hamburger chain with a female name, a girl's image for a logo, "hot and juicy" burgers (and her buns?), and a "Pick-up" window where other chains have "Drive Up" or "Drive Through" windows? (And, this chain is named for the owners daughter, no less!)

[9] Here, I am guilty of my own silence. I have never confronted Wendy's® with this issue, and as the Potato Head Kids™ have long gone from the boxes, I no longer know whether that would be a relevant act or not. Silence (particularly male silence) may be one of the largest forces among those "...strong conservative forces..." My own silence included.

[10] I am aware that this begins to sound like the Helms amendment, and wish to acknowledge the complex issue of censorship. While I want my students to enjoy the full freedom of the first amendment, I also will set limits on what I find acceptable and on what I will read. I reserve my first amendment rights to challenge students on beliefs or patterns of behavior (in their writing) which I believe might damage them or society at large. Yet, the basis of a free society must remain open debate, and even objectionable views must be included in that debate. So my students are not graded down for their beliefs, but will continue to receive comments on those beliefs. Ultimately, I am interested in consciousness-raising for those who repeat cultural beliefs inadvertently, that is, for those who wish to have choices and options. As a teacher, the best I can do is increase a student's perception of available options and trust that student to make sound choices.

[11] For a thorough and eloquent exploration of the ethos of masculinity, especially as related to sexuality and spirituality, see: Nelson, James B. **The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality**. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1988. A discussion of his work can be found in my essay-review of Nelson's book, published in *Journeymen: A Quarterly Newsletter Exploring Men's Issues*, Winter 1991, p.4. For a problematic discussion of masculine lack of intimacy and friendship, see: Miller, Stuart. **Men & Friendship**. San Leandro, CA: Gateway Books. c1983 (1986). A discussion of the problems I find with Miller's book will appear in the next issue of *Journeymen*, available from the publisher at 513 Chester Turnpike, Candia, NH 03034.

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